

PROLOGUE

A Planetary Parable

If growth automatically generated well-being, we would now be living in a paradise. We are in fact going down the road to hell.

–Serge Latouche, *Farewell to Growth*

Pathological consumption has become so normalized
that we scarcely notice it.

–George Monbiot, *The Gift of Death*

There is no end
To what a living world
Will demand of you.

–Lauren Olamina,

Earthseed: The Books of the Living

THIS LITTLE BOOK CONTAINS a parable of sorts about self-devouring growth, a term I use to refer to the ways that the super-organism of human beings is consuming itself. This is not a new tale. Many others have offered their versions over the years.¹ But like all parables, the lessons are worth contemplating anew.² The story is told from Botswana, southern Africa's miracle land, but self-devouring growth is everywhere to be seen. Wherever you sit reading this you are in a world organized by self-devouring growth. It is so fundamental as to be unremarkable, and yet it is eating away at the very ground beneath our feet. Whether you are a Motswana or someone who has never set foot in southern Africa such that the details of this particular version of the story are new to you, the plotlines should be familiar as they are yours and mine as well.³

Parable is a realist genre. What is to follow is not merely allegory. But parables also have larger meanings that are revealed through their structure as “illustrative parallel” or extended metaphor. Perhaps it is helpful to know that parable and parabola share a common root.⁴ In a parable we travel out, unfolding the metaphor in a parabolic shape. By journey’s end, we will have returned to the same plane on which we started, but somewhat farther along, in the hopes of having learned something from our experience along the way. In this case we will follow three metaphors in sequence. Each of them is material in nature. Each has a thingyness one can touch, see, smell, hear. Parables reveal urgent and sometimes uncomfortable truths that are hiding in plain sight.⁵ They conjoin the listener (and in this case the teller as well!) to recognize herself within the story. As your narrator, my use of the word “we” is not accidental. I have located myself at various moments in this account. So can you.

Botswana offers as fine a protagonist as any for this tale, which necessarily journeys at times to other lands. I have chosen her as our central character in this parable because I know her well and love her dearly, not because she is somehow more misguided than others. Far from it. Botswana is an upper-middle-income country, a “developing” country, in fact a paradigmatically successful one. She’s never gone to war. The modern nation of Botswana was born poor but peaceful amid a devastating drought. She came of age in a tough neighborhood surrounded by the violence and greed of institutionalized racism on all sides. Yet since gaining independence from Great Britain in 1966, Botswana has undergone decades of spectacular postcolonial economic growth, though things have leveled off of late. Out of the diamonds found secreted in her rock, the country has built schools and a system of universal health care, telecommunications and roads, clean water and pensions, vast nature preserves, and a functioning democracy. Of course, there was a time when human society was structured in such a way that nature preserves and old-age pensions were unnecessary. That does not take away from this impressive and vital postcolonial achievement, and the skill and intelligence of the people behind it. But it does remind us that industrial modernity is only one way to live.

Botswana is widely regarded as a developmental success, a miracle even.⁶ But even that success, it seems, presents its own uncertainties, its own horizon as growth becomes self-devouring. This growth has become the organizing logic of her development, its hoped-for future. And yet insatiable growth predicated on consumption will inevitably overwhelm.⁷ Botswana is a place from which we can think about the telos of development in relation to what the pope is calling “ecological sin.”

Botswana forces difficult questions onto the table; the moral of the story is not a simple one. The signs on the ground at present are anxious ones; we should divine their truths with great care. The future is always uncertain; no one knows what lies ahead. Sometimes dire scientific prophecies fail to materialize as forecast. Sometimes destruction comes out of seemingly nowhere and catches everyone by surprise. Scientific predictions of African environmental collapse have a long and troubling history. This is because scientific authority has been used to blame African practices for environmental challenges from desertification to ebola. Yet upon closer examination these problems arise out of complex political and economic histories rooted in European colonialism and/or corporate capitalism.⁸ My parable is not anti-science, this would be a false move. While its predictions need to be understood as provisional, a welter of scientific observation underpins the stories that lie ahead.

In 2016 record-breaking temperatures reached 44 degrees Celsius in the town of Maun in Botswana’s northern Okavango region, and over 43 degrees in other parts of the country. If global temperatures continue to climb in the ways scientists predict, Botswana will be one of the many places that will have more days of extreme heat, with predicted increases in heat-related deaths, an upsurge in malaria and dengue fever (diseases that were historically absent, except for endemic malaria in Okavango), and increasing drought, with attendant food and water insecurity.⁹ Grassland pasture is giving way to thornbush. The water table is sinking. Scientists predict that the wild painted dogs and the elusive antbear will die out in this shifting ecology. They caution that the spectacular Okavango Delta—the hub of Botswana’s high-end eco-tourism industry, the nation’s second largest in-

come earner, and site of some of the earliest human societies—will lose biodiversity as flooding and water distribution patterns shift and the water table drops. The day will eventually arrive when the diamonds that propelled Botswana's climb out of poverty are finished. The predictions are so dire that many either turn away in fatalism or dismiss them as exaggeration. Wherever we look, anticipating disasters now drives its own kind of growth industry.¹⁰ What if the end is nigh, but for a major rethinking and reorientation of human activity?

What were Botswana (as the people of Botswana call themselves) to do but grow their economy as best they could when the British left them deeply impoverished, and proletarianized, on a planet already polluted and warming through no fault of Botswana themselves?¹¹ Botswana have managed their development trajectory quite well—and yet, as you will read in the story that follows, all this and more may be in jeopardy in the coming years. Climate change and environmental conditions have long been part of a national conversation in Botswana, where technical expertise in conservation, agriculture, and geology is deep and authoritative. And yet . . . setting this story in Botswana will help elucidate our planetary predicament—an existential crisis if there ever was one, for those who live in the interstices of what are often narrated as the great political and economic divides of the contemporary world—rich/poor; first world/third world; north/south. A caution is perhaps in order for my fellow American readers—before you think you know what's best for Botswana, you might consider the dynamics of growth in California.

The Problem of Self-Devouring Growth

Economic growth is a paradigm that has become so second nature that when people are thinking about a place in this world and how to improve it, immediately they/we assume that growth must be the basis of that effort. Without us really noticing it, growth has become this unmarked category granted magical powers. As growth remains the common sense, the unexamined imperative, and so much is done in its name, a cascade of

unseen consequences, side effects, also become second nature, a process I call self-devouring growth.

Self-devouring growth is a name for a set of material relationships. By material I mean there is something with physical properties being devoured. Growth is not inherently bad. Growth can be healthy, can be a sign of vitality. Self-devouring growth departs from these other forms by operating under an imperative—*grow or die; grow or be eaten*—with an implicit assumption that this growth is predicated on uninhibited consumption. The perversion happens in two linked ways: first in how the protagonists of growth envision and appropriate the resources upon which it is fed, and second in how they attend to the production of waste that is a by-product of consumption-driven growth. This particular model of growth even became a logical means of constructing healthy, robust societies, such that there is something intractable about this thinking—grow the economy, grow a business, grow a market, grow, grow, GROW! is a mantra so powerful that it obscures the destruction it portends.¹²

In other words, self-devouring growth is a cancerous model. These are mutant forms of out-of-control growth that emerge in nodes but eventually spread into every crevice of the planetary body, harnessing its blood supply, eating through its tissue, producing rot and pain that will eventually kill the larger organism. As with cancer, we mourn each individual loss as tragic, be it Bob Marley, my Aunt Jill, the American bison, or the Guatemalan farmland now lying open as a suppurating wound after the Canadian-owned nickel mine consumed the bedrock. And yet the big picture of what is driving these losses is almost too big to take in. And so the larger dynamic of destruction is somehow accepted as the necessary cost of the good things in life.¹³

We pour our hopes into technological solutions. Technologies can be wonderful, but they are insufficient to save us from a problem whose roots lie deeper. Certainly electric cars are better than gasoline-powered cars. But if everyone is to have one, and if everyone is to want a new one every few years, we will still consume vast quantities of glass, aluminum, plastic, and steel, still have a problem of disposing of used tires and brake fluid, of building road capacity, of mining cobalt, nickel, lithium, and

graphite to power them. The capitalism that structures the contemporary global economy is the most significant engine of this dynamic, its organizing telos, and peddler of its narcotic. Ever more intensive forms of capitalist consumption animate a system that will harm everyone, even those whose consumption mainly remains aspirational. But while self-devouring growth is the central dynamic of capitalism, it cannot be reduced to it.¹⁴ The former Soviet Union undertook its own version of self-devouring growth. So did Maoist China.

When later in this book we follow Botswana beef into a Norwegian primary school cafeteria — a Scandinavian socialist space if there ever was one — what we will find is nonetheless part of a larger system of growth-led planetary devastation that will happen long before the poor get their turn at the trough.¹⁵ Despite some of the redistributions of socialism, consumption by the elite, middle class, and aspirant grows at rates that far outstrip these leveling forces, dictating a disposition toward growth without end. The underclass — standing there on the front lines as they always must do — may get little growth but be devoured nonetheless. Sir Richard Branson, airline magnate, and his “team” rode out Hurricane Irma in the well-stocked and fortified bunker on his private Caribbean island, while people in neighboring Barbuda (perhaps home to some of his “team”) lacked such protections entirely. Recovery becomes its own growth industry.¹⁶

Some might object, as they have since Malthus, that population growth drives the need for economic growth and so it is the poor, those chronic reproducers, who must be tamed. Yet this is a misunderstanding of how consumption, not to mention reproduction, works. Take New York City, where I live, as an example. A recent report estimated that only 2 percent of the one million buildings in my city accounted for 45 percent of the city’s energy use and attendant greenhouse gas emissions. These buildings included those where some of the wealthiest New Yorkers (Donald Trump, David Koch, Alice Walton — all climate-change deniers) reside. Meanwhile low- and middle-income New Yorkers, packed into tiny apartments and necessarily frugal about their energy use in our very expensive city, were nonetheless dispro-

portionately exposed to the dangers of Hurricane Sandy. Over half of the victims of the storm surge were renters with average annual incomes of USD 18,000,¹⁷ well below the city median of USD 60,000. Or consider the problem in regional terms. An average citizen of the United States like myself requires more than twice the amount of bioproductive space on our finite planet to support her consumption than the average European. The European, in turn, consumes twenty times the rate of most Africans.¹⁸ While the elite consume the most and then the middle classes, these days even the poor consume at escalating rates. Yet they are sold poor-quality goods that make them ill, and are forced to reside amid the toxic detritus — the by-products and the wastelands of growth.¹⁹

Development is often posited as economic growth.²⁰ Under its umbrella there are many projects and visions for better health, education, and well-being, but these are often subsumed by the hegemonic growth vision of development economists. Arguments are made that health, education, infrastructure, and institutional capacity will all facilitate growth. Units of analysis in turn truncate and bind relationships of distribution, such that redistribution is left a national affair at best.²¹ Proponents imagine growth as the way to ensure that the needs of the poor are taken care of. There is a sense that if everything grows then finally there will be enough. But this trickle-down fantasy will dry up as resource scarcity increases on our finite planet.

Meanwhile, up at the top and increasingly in the middle and even below, consumption escalates rapidly. Growth is said to bring jobs, but often it does not. Or the jobs arrive and then depart again never to return, or the jobs arrive, but they pay so little for work so numbing that they fail to be the ladders to the good life imagined by the growth proponents.²² This is certainly the case in Botswana, where the economy has grown, the population has urbanized, and yet despite persistent effort, unemployment remains intractable. Botswana has placed nets underneath her poorest citizens, who like the poor everywhere are disproportionately female; it has sought pathways for many out of the poverty that the colonial migrant labor system wrought. These are incredibly important achievements. But Botswana has been

unable to employ her people adequately in an economy structured around growth. Africa's miracle is the third most unequal country on the continent, the tenth most unequal on earth. The Gini coefficient tells as much about rampant consumption at the top, and increasingly in the middle, as it does about the poverty at the bottom. By 2015 the World Bank was cautioning that consumer spending, facilitated in large part on credit, was driving Botswana's economy.²³ The relationship between growth and personal debt is its own self-devouring paradox.

Is Another World Possible?

Growth-driven development is also predicated on a facile evolutionary model.²⁴ The implicit aim is to take Botswana or Honduras or Cambodia and, through economic growth, create infrastructure and consumption like there is in Canada or Australia. The same of course could be said for turning Brownsville, Brooklyn, into Park Slope. And yet, these developed economies that are the aspiration are the prime engines of a kind of voraciousness that is leading us off a cliff. Perhaps new goals are in order for Park Slope and Brownsville alike. Figuring out these goals will require understanding how Park Slope and Brownsville or, say, Honduras and Canada, are actually two sides of a single relationship. Figuring out these goals will also require a new imagination.

Over the past few centuries there have been forms of thought, modes of reasoning, and metaphysical understandings all over the world that were deemed irrational, superstitious, marginal, and whatever else under the sign of colonialism and enlightenment reason. But all our rational thought and rational knowledge—development, from economics to engineering being a good example—has produced a world that is highly irrational indeed over the long run, suicidal, self-devouring. What else might we find if we take seriously those forms of knowledge that have been purged or suppressed? I don't say any of this as a romantic gesture—replacing industrial (and postindustrial) capitalism and techno-science with nineteenth-century Tswana healing rites is neither tenable nor a plausible solution for what

ails us.²⁵ But as we follow these tales, I will show you forms of insight, ethical modalities, metaphysical flashes of brilliance, and modes of life worth contemplating. Such knowledge can contribute to the unlocking of our collective imagination, an imagination we are going to need quite dearly in the rapidly unfolding future.

We aren't going back. We can't. And why would we want to? That would mean a world without insulin, and quite possibly amid that rapacious obscenity of self-devouring growth, the Atlantic slave trade. Relying on women and girls to carry water on their heads many kilometers each day is not a romantic vision. The point is not that things are worse now than they were then (though they may be for some), but rather that we may well be devouring our future. If we are to think beyond the self-devouring growth drive, then we must open those repositories of the imagination—the before, the against, and the besides—that have been or are now being crushed by it.²⁶ There are many of them. This book opens the storehouse in Botswana and reads from a few corners of a vast field of insight.²⁷

The worlds therein are not utopian. Nor are these worlds homogenous or static. The territory of modern Botswana has been a place of dynamic human creativity longer than most other places on earth, though my story will be drawing from only a few centuries deep. Beginning in roughly 1400 CE, but picking up pace amid the droughts of the eighteenth century, groups of African settlers, who much later would be anachronistically referred to by historians as “Tswana,” moved onto the eastern plateau (the highveld) of present-day Botswana.²⁸ Their large herds of cattle gave them a mode of claiming territorial sovereignty. The highveld was not empty when they arrived. Nor were these “Tswana” one people or one polity. Mixed societies of Bantu, San, and Khoe people already there fled west as the newcomers arrived, heading farther into the Kalahari Desert. Or if they stayed, they might have had their cattle seized, or their hunting and gathering curtailed, rendering them as cattle-herding servants or slaves for the new residents.

Over the ensuing centuries, refugees and other migrant groups would be incorporated into the growing kingdoms/

chiefdoms. Ecological stress or political tension caused new groups to splinter off and settle new areas. As historian Paul Landau tells us, these societies were “well-equipped to embrace and absorb strangers.”²⁹ As such they were mixed and continually mixing, flexible and adaptive. The term “Tswana” used throughout my story hardens this fluidity and heterogeneity and thereby misleads. Absorption did not mean an erasure of origins. Hierarchies of origin and of genealogy mattered, as did those of gender and age. A whole welter of ethnic mythos, alternating between the romantic and the derogatory, emerged to characterize the ethnic underclasses and explain their oppressed status. The arrival of British missionaries and eventual colonization in the nineteenth century amplified such depictions while also consolidating a new ethnonym — Tswana. Among people there was debate, disagreement, and difference, there were struggles and tensions, much of which will necessarily be glossed over in the tale I will tell.

Though my story will efface some of this richness, it finds in Tswana thought and practice traces that suggest other politics by which distribution might proceed—amid a growth that is cyclical rather than relentless. Sometimes a cycle of growth was leveled through horrible experiences of collapse like famine, epidemic disease, or war. Such clues recall a place in which some property is collective and attendant responsibilities are assumed, yet managed through gendered and age-based hierarchies of access; politics that engage in participatory democracy amid palpable pecking orders of status and wealth and the private dealings they portend; people who prize autonomy but assume interdependence.

What follows will unfold in three parts: water, food, movement—all vital human needs. Or put another way, rain, cattle, roads—all distribution systems that are good to think with. There are others. One could tell a thousand and one tales of self-devouring growth, but I will limit myself to three.